Japanese Culture: Social Customs And Rituals

One of the oldest societies in Asia, Japan has a rich culture full of ancient rituals, social customs, traditions, and powerfully held beliefs all with a strong connection to religion and nature. It is the influence of Buddhism and Shinto that has initiated the evolution of the Japanese culture over hundreds of years, marrying ancient observances with more modern discoveries turning the Japanese culture into a mixture of the old and the new, the past and the present. It is the diversity and richness of the Japanese culture, as well as strict adherence by the Japanese people, that gives endurance to strongly held beliefs about life and death, diet, healthcare, social interactions, the roles of men and women, blood donation, as well as controversial topics like abortion and organ donation, to name a few.

Shinto is the native religion of Japan and ties all its rituals and beliefs to nature, including the worshiping of nature spirits like the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, who is the guardian of the people and Mother of all creation. (Orias.berkeley.edu, 2020, Paragraph 15) Buddhists worship eight deities including Yama, the God of death. The religious teachings also lend themselves to superstitions like not opening umbrellas inside because you will usher in the bad spirits. It is the merging of the value systems of these religions that can be seen throughout the Japanese culture.

The Japanese formalized the rituals surrounding death during the Edo Period (1603-1867) creating the customs of family grave sites, the worshiping of ancestral spaces in Buddhist Temples, along with elaborate, publicly held funeral rituals and a wake, all closely tied to Buddhism. (Japantimes.co.jp, 2006, Paragraph 3) Cremation is on the rise, along with more intimate family funeral proceedings. Family and friends send baskets and cards to relay their condolences, household shrines are covered with white paper, and white paper lanterns are displayed outside the homes. Bodies are washed, knives are buried on the chest of the dead for protection, six coins for the crossing of the Sanzu River, and women are buried in kimonos and men in fine suits. The Buddhist believe in rebirth and Shinto believe in kami, but not reincarnation. Both believe that a person’s consciousness is gone at the time of death and recycled. The Japanese culture believes in living a good life, respecting elders, worshiping ancestors, preparing for death by meditating in order to have influence over your rebirth, releasing bad habits, and working toward ending suffering by ceasing to chase after things that don’t make you happy or will not last forever.

The Japanese culture marries the more traditional practice of Kampo with more modern western medical doctrines. Patients can receive prescriptions for herbal treatments or pharmaceuticals. They can visit a healer or see a physician. Japanese doctors are predominantly male and have a higher social status than nurses, therefore the doctors handle most of the patient’s treatments. Even though acupuncture originated in China, the Japanese have a widely accepted version of their own. Since most of Japan’s views on health center around maintaining balance in one’s life and body, healers are utilized to help maintain this balance. There is no cultural prohibition to surgery, in fact the most popular surgery in Japan is a cosmetic eyelid surgery. Blood transfusions are accepted since the products come from living people, abortion is also widely accepted, but there is a more negative attitude toward organ donation since the religious interpretations regarding brain death is seen as an impure death;

however, despite this negativity, transplant surgeries are still performed.

The Japanese have one of the lowest infant and maternal mortality rates in the world; however, the Japanese physicians restrict the weight gain of the mother during pregnancy. If born with a physical disability there is great care to ensure the child has every resource necessary for a normal life as dictated in the Law of Welfare for People with Physical Disabilities, the Public Assistance Law, and the Child Welfare Law. On the flip side, there is a stigma toward mental illness, which limits the access to proper mental health care. As for genetic disorders, Kabuki-Syndrome is rare while Moyamoya is the most prevalent. Despite the Japanese culture promoting a healthy balance in the body, high-risk behaviors such as smoking, alcoholism, and inactivity are widespread, especially among the younger population.

Japan is a culture with clearly defined gender roles. Women manage the household, make the family decisions, and the manage the budget, while men work outside the home. After World War II occupation, the feudal system was eliminated and women began to pursue careers, straying further away from marriage and having children. Today, women are trapped between traditional values and modern values, while men are struggling with the idea of being stay-at-home fathers. When socializing, the Japanese culture values and expects punctuality at all times, direct eye contact is considered rude, body language is used to determine how someone is feeling, and when it comes to personal space, they prefer to stand at arms lengths with almost no touching between men and women.

The Japanese diet consists of more fish than red meat and is balanced with vegetables, fruit, and some rice or tofu. They have smaller portion sizes and eat slowly. For special occasions such as holidays and other festivals, red, considered a lucky color, is seen in food choices like red beans and sweet rice wine. They eat lobster and cake at birthday celebrations and a whole fish broiled with salt for New Years. Pregnant women drink tea without any caffeine restrictions. When Japanese are sick, they eat green onion and ginger.

The Japanese culture balances the religious teachings of Buddhism and Shinto, along with a need for balance in body and life through the many rituals and other observances that are tied to nature with newer influences from around the world. All these combined give us the Japanese culture of today, a mixture of the old and new, the past and present.